DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 382 948 CS 214 821

AUTHOR	Bigler, Ellen; Collins, James
TITLE	Dangerous Discourses: The Politics of Multicultural Literature in Community and Classroom. Report Series 7.4.
INSTITUTION	National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning, Albany, NY.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	95
CONTRACT	R117G10015
NOTE	37p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Cultural Differences; *Ethnic Bias; Ethnography; Intermediate Grades; Junior High Schools; Middle Schools; Multicultural Education; Preservice Teacher Education; *School Community Relationship; *Teacher Attitudes; Teaching Conditions
IDENTIFIERS	*Multicultural Materials; New York (Upstate); School Culture

ABSTRACT

An in-depth ethnographic study of an upstate New York Middle School in an ethnically polarized community investigated teacher and community response to multicultural literature initiatives. Most of the data for the study came from interviews with and observations of teachers in the school; it was collected mostly over the 1991-92 school year when members of the community were engaged in a conflict between a growing Hispanic population and the town's Euro-American senior citizen population over adapting school practices to meet the needs of the minority youth. In addition to the teachers, 23 minority students were interviewed in depth, as well as a range of parents and politically active community members. Follow-up interviews were conducted in the 1992-93 school year. Results show the importance of recognizing the teacher as the key link in the process of broadening school curriculums through multicultural materials. While teachers used multicultural texts, they drew upon their own experiences and popular understandings in ways that silenced particular discourses--for example, through omission of particular types of selections, avoidance of classroom discussion, or subtle reinforcement of societal biases. These practice were not intended to be harmful to any particular group; most of the teachers were very interested in acting in the best interest of their students. Reasons for this shortcoming could be attributed to the fact that most teachers received their degrees before multiculturalism became an agenda at universities. Also, working conditions can prevent teachers from working through new ideas. Essentially isolated behind closed doors, they do not observe each other teach and do not continue their education usually beyond the courses required for a master's degree. (Contains 70 references.) (TB)

ED 382 948

Dangerous Discourses: The Politics of Multicultural Literature in Community and Classroom

Ellen Bigler
James Collins

National Research Center on
Literature Teaching & Learning
UNIVERSITY AT ALBANY • SUNY

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

CS214521

Literature Center

School of Education • 1400 Washington Avenue • Albany, New York 12222

 BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Dangerous Discourses: The Politics of Multicultural Literature in Community and Classroom

Ellen Bigler
James Collins

National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning
University at Albany
State University of New York
1400 Washington Avenue, Albany, New York 12222

Report Series 7.4

1995

Preparation of this report was supported under the Educational Research and Development Center Program (Grant number R117G10015) as administered by the Office of Research, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. The findings and opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of the sponsoring agency.

National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning

The National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning is a research and development center located at the University at Albany, State University of New York. The Center was established in 1987 (as the Center for Learning and Teaching of Literature), and in January 1991 began a new, five-year cycle of work sponsored by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. The Center's mission is to conduct research and sponsor activities to improve the teaching of literature, preschool through grade 12, in schools across the nation.

Center-sponsored research falls into three broad areas: teaching and learning processes, curriculum and assessment, and social and cultural traditions in the teaching and learning of literature. Special attention is given to the role of literature in the teaching and learning of students at risk for school failure, and to the development of higher-level literacy skills, literary understanding, and critical thinking skills in all students.

For information on current publications and activities, write to: Literature Center, School of Education, University at Albany, 1400 Washington Avenue, Albany, NY 12222

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank the teachers, students, administrators, and families whose assistance made this paper possible. This is a Project 11 Technical Report for the National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning at SUNY Albany. We are indebted to Alan Purves for initial comments and literature suggestions and to Celia Genishi and Roseanne Gonzalez for detailed reviewing of an earlier version of this paper. All errors of fact or interpretation are our own.

Dangerous Discourses: The Politics of Multicultural Literature in Community and Classroom

Ellen Bigler
James Collins

When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing.
—Adrienne Rich, "Invisibility in Academe"

INTRODUCTION

The moment of self-nothingness that Rich describes points to the role of definitions, knowledge, and exclusion in American education. It concerns the way in which the stories told and the stories silenced are part of a selective process of self-recognition and self-formation that implicate apparently neutral questions of school knowledge in heated ongoing debates about multiculturalism, cultural identity, and social conflict. An often-asked question in this debate is whether and how school knowledge builds upon and affirms some identities while destabilizing and negating other identities. A question less frequently addressed is how local educational participants—teachers, students, families, and community members—perceive and participate in this debate.

We now know some general things about culture and curriculum, schooling process, and social oppression. An impressive body of research has demonstrated the multiple ways in which schools work to disenfranchise nonmainstream youth (e.g., Cook-Gumperz, 1986, and Edelsky, 1991, on literacy, language, and ethnic-based disadvantage; Gillborn, 1990, on racial stereotyping and teacher expectations; Oakes, 1985, on tracking). One way in which schools disadvantage particular groups is through the curriculum taught in schools, including the literature choices offered to students and the ways in which such selections are handled in the classroom (e.g., Banks, 1991; Harris, 1992). Classroom texts have been a focal point in debates about the school curriculum. Beginning in the 1960s, analyses of children's and adolescents' literature have compiled ample evidence of the existence of stereotypes, distortions, and omissions in texts, both those in use in the public

schools as well as children's literature in general.[1] An underlying assumption of the critiques of traditional children's literatures was that such literatures not only reflected, but also taught and reinforced negative images of people of color, causing harm both to those misrepresented and to those assimilating the distorted perspectives (see Lindgren, 1991). Making the school curriculum more "multicultural" has been proposed as a critical step toward redressing schooled inequalities, with positive effects for all students (cf. Au, 1993; Banks, 1988; New York State Social Studies Review and Development Committee, 1991; Ramsey, Vold, & Williams, 1989; Sleeter, 1991; Sobol, 1989).

A modest trend toward culturally diversifying children's literature emerged during the 1960s and 1970s, though it weakened in the conservative 1980s (Barrera, Liguori, & Salas, 1992). Despite recent assertions of a "huge demand" for multicultural titles (Jones, 1991), both the quantity and quality of available multicultural children's literature is viewed by minority writers and multiculturalists as woefully inadequate (see, for example, selections in Harris, 1992; Lindgren, 1991). Howard (1991, p. 93), reports that

> the percentage of books depicting non-majority experiences written and illustrated by people from that experience is appalling; at best, it is one percent of all the children's books being published.[2]

Studies of literature instruction in schools also indicate that literature selections remain very narrowly defined, with the literature canon changing "with glacial slowness" (Applebee, 1990, p. 67). While some progress since the 1960s has been noted in broadening the range of authors included in classroom literature anthologies, such modest gains do not necessarily translate into changed classroom practices. Analyzing responses from a random sampling of 650 secondary schools across the United States, Applebee (1990, p. 122) concluded that literature selections taught in the classroom remained very narrowly defined:

---

[1] Larrick (1965), for instance, found that only four-fifths of one percent of the 5,000 children's books published from 1962 to 1964 by members of the Children's Book Council included mention of contemporary African Americans. Initially focusing on African Americans and women (e.g., Lieberman, 1972), such analyses were extended to incorporate other marginalized groups, including Native Americans, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, and Asians (e.g., Costo and Henry, 1970; Council on Interracial Books for Children, 1975, 1976).

[2] There is disagreement about the actual numbers. Where Howard argues 1 percent, Jones (1991) reported in Newsweek that multicultural titles now account for 10 percent of all books published for children. The discrepancy between Jones's numbers and those put forward by people working to expand the availability of "culturally authentic" multicultural literature for children (e.g., Lindgren, 1991; Harris, 1992; in addition to Howard, 1991) is large, and may be a product of differing definitions of which texts should be counted, taking into consideration such factors as the author's background, avoidance of stereotyping, reissuing of older texts, etc. Whatever the actual percentages, they appear to be a low proportion, in purely quantitative terms, given the population percentage of national minorities in the United States.

> In the present survey, only 16 percent of the selections chosen for study during a five day period were written by women, and only 7 percent were by non-White authors. The narrowness of the selections is particularly troublesome given some 20 years of emphasis in the professional literature on the need to move beyond traditional selections, to better recognize the diverse cultural traditions that contribute to contemporary American life as well as to the broader world of which we are a part.

Though proceeding with perhaps glacial slowness, there is change afoot. Across the nation, to varying degrees, English teachers are now being asked to reexamine their literature choices in order to better reflect and more accurately portray the multicultural reality of the United States. The thrust to introduce such texts into the nation's classrooms has of course not gone unchallenged. Attempts to alter traditional school canons have been caught up in recent battles over "political correctness" (e.g., Hymowitz, 1991) and have led to charges that broadening the curriculum to include the voices of the marginalized ultimately promotes ethnic particularism (Gray, 1991; Ravitch, 1990). However, while we know some things about the rationale for multicultural reform, and the general opposition to it, we do not know much about the second question we initially posed: how local participants perceive of and participate in the debate about multicultural education.

In the following case study we will focus on this "local" question, arguing that to integrate the voices of previously unheard groups is not a simple or straightforward process of substituting one set of curriculum selections for another. We organize our analysis around a detailed case study in order that we may explore how the community and institutional context as well as teacher perceptions and understandings influence the ways in which multicultural initiatives may be incorporated, resisted, or subverted "on the ground." In our analysis, we pay close attention to various discourses—to debates about racial bias and local schools, to teachers' responses to multicultural literature, to the treatment of talk and text in literature classrooms—because we are interested in a striking paradox of the multicultural debate. Although the language of multiculturalism and inclusion unproblematically suggests "opening up" and "broadening" our visions of ourselves, our history, our literature canons, our classroom teaching styles, and the like, multiculturalism is also clearly a threat to many. We think that this is so because multicultural curricula have the potential to challenge the "silences" that exist in schools around issues such as race and class.

These silences are important, however, for existing arrangements in and out of schools. They are the routine taken-for-granteds and the exclusions of contrary perspectives that allow social actors to ignore contradictions in their lives and crises in their institutions (Murphy, 1970). Otherwise put, they are part of a social etiquette that allows existing

inclusions and exclusions to go unremarked, and thus to appear natural. Challenge to silence is dangerous. It destabilizes commonsense understandings—e.g., that problems of racism, unequal education, and poverty are matters of individual morality and effort—and is therefore threatening, especially in a situation of mounting conflict. We must acknowledge that teachers, like their students, enter the schools as raced, classed, and gendered actors. The significance of this fact when urging and implementing multicultural reforms in schools is that while breaking school silences may "open up" the schools for previously excluded groups, it threatens other identities.

ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

Although the focus of our discussion will be on teachers' responses to multicultural initiatives and on classroom practices with multicultural texts, our analysis is developed out of a larger study of the politics of multicultural reform at the levels of community debate and state agency intervention. Let us therefore quickly lay out our research procedures as well as the ethnographic background to the more school-focused events we will analyze in detail.

The findings presented in this paper are derived from an in-depth ethnographic study of an upstate New York middle school in the ethnically polarized community of Arnhem,[3] where conflict between a growing Hispanic[4] population and the city's Euro-American senior citizen population erupted into the public domain during the course of our study. In 1991-1992, tensions surfaced in Arnhem as minority leaders (most of them Hispanics) and Euro-American senior citizens publicly debated whether school practices needed to be adapted to meet the needs of minority youth. The first author, Ellen Bigler, had been intermittently present in the school and community for over a year prior to the ensuing conflict, examining relations between school and home literacies for Hispanic youth. Thus, we were well positioned to observe the responses of the community and its educators to the public debate and proposed reform measures, including among them the attempt to expand the secondary literature curriculum in order to make it more inclusive.

---

[3]Pseudonyms have been used for all people and places. In some instances minor biographical details have been altered.

[4]Controversy exists over the use of the terms *Hispanic* (seen as only acknowledging Spanish roots) vs. *Latino* (perceived as also embracing African and Native American cultural and racial components), as well as over the use of any umbrella term that obscures differences among Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, and Cuban Americans (see for instance Melville, 1988); we have chosen to use both terms. In Arnhem the terms *Hispanic* and *minority* tend to be used by European Americans. Hispanics frequently identify other Hispanics by their ethnic origins (i.e., as Puerto Rican, Dominican, or Costa Rican) and in informal settings sometimes collectively as *Spanish*. Hispanic community agency representatives, when speaking publicly, tend to use the term *Hispanic* when setting themselves off from the mainstream as a group with special interests. Among younger minority activists, the term *Latino* is more likely to be used.

Research Methodology

The majority of our data, including interviews and observation in the schools and at community events, was gathered during the time of the conflict, over the course of the 1991-1992 school year. Having begun to analyze the public debate about schooling and bias, the field researcher (Bigler) focused also on the community's middle school.[5] In order to understand the teachers' practical as well as reported responses to multicultural initiatives, the researcher observed a range of teachers in the classroom, focusing in depth on three English teachers (two to five times per week) over a six-month period; she became a "regular" in the faculty rooms and at departmental and school-board meetings, and formally interviewed half of the professional staff regarding their responses and concerns to mounting pressures to make the school environment more multicultural. She interviewed 23 minority students in depth, as well as a range of parents and politically active community members, and she attended community and school events. Some interviews with teachers and students, along with follow-up interviews, were conducted the following (1992-1993) school year. Thus, contacts with members of the community and schools, including involvement prior to the public debate, extended over a three-year period.

The Public Debate

Charges of racism and racial insensitivity in Arnhem schools became a focal issue following publication in the local newspaper of disparaging comments about Latin American governments and Hispanics made by a (Euro-American) senior citizen on the school board. Minority community leaders demanded his removal, urged the school district to implement bilingual education programs and training in multicultural education, and contested the lack of representation of people of color among teachers, administrative personnel, and staff in the district (this conflict has been more fully analyzed in Bigler, 1994.) A local African American woman took on a leadership role, which included writing to the New York State Commissioner of Education regarding her concerns about the schooling of minority youth and community responses to school-board racism. While echoing the concerns expressed in the Hispanic Needs Assessment, she also emphasized the existence of racial tensions and hostility in the schools (and community):

> It is frightening that students are given the right by the administration's silence to express their prejudices in the school. . . . You have obvious segregation and racial

---

[5]Some information and quotations are also drawn from interviews with teachers in one of the feeder elementary schools and the district high school.

> slurs being tossed about in a school by students and teachers. . . . You have a school board and administration that repeatedly says, "there are NO racial problems, here." . . . In light of my own experiences, and the testimony of many children and parents in the district, the continued denial on the part of the Administration and Board that a problem exists make it clear that they are grossly incompetent and negligent. . . .

New York State Education Department Involvement

The public charges of unfair treatment of minority students in the district led to a New York State Education Department (NYSED) investigation of school practices and policies. The investigation occurred following a protracted debate in the media, initially over whether the charges of unfair treatment were true and whether the school board member who had made the statements that set off the furor should resign from the school-board.[6] The debate rapidly evolved into an angry exchange between a large faction of senior citizens claiming that Hispanics didn't really *want* to be Americans and were unwilling to work hard and assimilate like the senior citizens and their parents had; and a small contingent of outspoken minority leaders and their supporters among the white population, who argued that diversity was a virtue and that the challenges facing the minority community were rooted in the unfair treatment they often received at the hands of the majority. The debate was extensively covered in regional newspapers, and even as far afield as Georgia after an AP report was filed on it.

The six-member NYSED site research team assigned to investigate the district spent three days in Arnhem observing and talking with teachers, administrators, students, parents, and other community members, and gathering school documents for review. The report they subsequently issued had been prepared with several initial assumptions in place. Drawn from recent research and theory on teaching culturally different students, these assumptions included: (1) that institutional practices such as ability tracking adversely affect disadvantaged youth; (2) that role models such as minority teachers are good for minority students; (3) that curricula and school practices ought to include and value the culture and language of minority students; and (4) that greater parental involvement in schools would benefit minority youth (cf. Grant, 1992; Nieto, 1992; Oakes, 1985).

In Arnhem they found, as they would have in many upstate New York communities, almost no minority personnel, little in the curriculum drawing upon Latino culture or language, and Latino students disproportionately concentrated in the lower educational

---

[6]Two progressive members of the school board called for his resignation, but lost the vote. Five of the nine board members, including the board member who had made the comments, were senior citizens elected overwhelmingly by the senior citizen population. Fiscal conservatives, they voted so consistently on all matters that they were dubbed the "Gang of Five" in the local newspaper.

tracks. The ensuing NYSED report called for numerous reforms designed to better meet the needs of minority students, including detracking, addressing racial prejudice, cultural sensitivity training, hiring more bilingual and minority personnel, improving school-community relations, and curriculum reform. Arnhem had clearly been found wanting, but in their initial press conference on their findings and their subsequent report, NYSED emphasized that the situation in Arnhem was not exceptional. The NYSED intervention focused school attention on questions of bias and multicultural curriculum.

The Context of Ethnic Tensions

Arnhem is a small industrial city, and its history is not unlike that of many cities in the deindustrializing Northeast. Earlier waves of immigrants and their children were able to take advantage of the region's and nation's economic expansion during the first half of the twentieth century, but today's newcomers to the city—most of them people of color—confront a dramatically different reality. Economic trends already under way in the 1950s—most significantly factory owners moving their operations south, where labor was cheap and unions less powerful—contributed to a rapid loss of stable employment opportunities in the region. With the rapid erosion of stable blue-collar employment opportunities have come significant changes: a declining tax base, the exodus of many of working age from the community, and the growth of secondary labor market employment. The ethnic makeup of the city has simultaneously shifted, as a growing number of Latinos—the majority Puerto Rican—have migrated to the area.

The older ethnic groups in Arnhem were predominantly Italian and Polish, and today they dominate local politics including, until very recently, the school board. There is considerable friction between this older population of Euro-American "ethnics" and the Latino population. It is not uncommon, particularly among the senior citizen population, to hear people complaining about the city being "overrun" and "destroyed" by the Hispanics (in particular, in their opinion, Puerto Ricans). Talk about "all the violence in the schools" and how "those people" don't take care of their homes and children is frequently heard.

Local Hispanics are well aware of such sentiments, and many will privately discuss how they bitterly resent being looked down upon and stereotyped. Publicly, Hispanic community leaders led the confrontation with the school board over racist remarks and bias in the schools. The concerns about educating minority youth had been expressed by Hispanic spokespersons in Arnhem prior to the public conflict that developed in 1991-1992. Early in 1991 a local Hispanic community agency had detailed in a "Hispanic Community Needs Assessment" their concerns about the education of minority (in

particular Latino) youth in the district. They were specifically concerned about linguistic intolerance, the lack of qualified bilingual staff, the inattention to Puerto Rican or other minority histories in social studies, the disproportionate tracking of Hispanic students into nonacademic courses, and the high drop-out rate of Hispanic students (12.3% for Hispanics and 5.1% for non-Hispanics).[7]

Social Background of Local Teachers

Teachers in the Arnhem middle school reflected the older composition of the community. Nearly half had grown up in the city, and nearly half (44%; N = 47) reported Italian or Polish heritage. Having grown up in Arnhem, many remember hearing the stories of immigrant hardship and sacrifice that Arnhem seniors frequently cite when assessing the progress of Hispanic "newcomers."[8] Over 90% of our nation's teachers are white (Sleeter & Grant, 1988), and Arnhem is no exception to the rule. All Arnhem teachers and administrators,[9] with the exception of one African American Spanish-language teacher who was raised in Arnhem, are Euro-American. They teach a student body with a growing percentage of students of color: 17% are Hispanic, 2% African American, and 1% Asian American.[10] In the Arnhem Middle School, the focus of our research study, 20% of the 600 students are Hispanic, 2% African American, and 1% Asian. Fifty-nine of the 60 teachers employed during the 1991-1992 school year were European-American. While some teachers had studied another language in college, or recollected fragments of European languages spoken in their homes as children, none of them—with the exception of the Spanish language teachers and the ESL teacher—were able to converse in Spanish.

The distribution of teachers and administrators by gender in the middle school also tends to parallel the findings from data gathered on U.S. teachers in general (Sleeter and Grant, 1988). Sixty-five percent of the teachers are female, while the two building administrators are male. All English and reading teachers (7) were female, as well as all

---

[7]Specific changes and figures are taken from *Hispanic Community Needs Assessment 1991*. Publication information does not appear in the bibliography in order to preserve the anonymity of the community.

[8]Hispanics in Arnhem are perceived as newcomers, though some families go back to the post-World War II years. In addition, they are considered to be "immigrants" and therefore not yet "American," despite the fact that Puerto Ricans, who make up approximately 80% of the local Latino population, arrive on the mainland as U.S. citizens.

[9]A bilingual Puerto Rican elementary principal was hired from outside the district for the following school year. A bilingual math teacher was also sought out and hired to work with ESL students, but as one of our informants, an outspoken African American activist, pointed out, she was Euro-American and *not* bicultural.

[10]Data on local teachers and students are drawn from a questionnaire on teachers' ethnic, class and educational backgrounds administered to teachers in the middle school; data compiled by the New York State Education Department in its investigation of the school district; and the *Hispanic Community Needs Assessment 1991* compiled by Centro Civico of Arnhem.

the language (5), special education (5), and "home and careers" (3) teachers. Males predominated in the areas of math (5 of 7) and technology (4 of 5), though comprising only half the social studies (3 of 6) and two-fifths (2 of 5) of the science department. Also congruent with national patterns, it was an older teaching staff: The average age of the middle school teacher was almost 40 years.

The overwhelming majority of middle school teachers reporting on parental education indicated that they had surpassed their parents educationally. Sixty-two percent of the teachers' parents had a high school degree or less (with 17% of the fathers, and 12% of both parents combined leaving high school before graduation). Only 21% of their parents had four-year college degrees. Among the teachers, many had acquired their degrees at state colleges in the 1960s and 1970s, a period of rapid expansion in the numbers of college graduates. They saw themselves as having achieved a degree of upward mobility, to have "made it" into the middle class, and they generally viewed themselves as professionals—though many felt they were not accorded the respect and status of other professionals.

TEACHER RESPONSES TO MULTICULTURAL INITIATIVES AND LITERATURES

Many teachers, administrators, and board members felt unfairly attacked when charges of racism in the school district were leveled, and they complained that the district had been unfairly singled out by the New York State Education Department. References abounded to the NYSED investigation as a "witch hunt" with predetermined findings—for example, in the following letter to the editor:

> "I've been in the schools talking to a lot of the teachers and every one of them said they expect the state to give us a report that is 95 percent negative," school board member Jim Barker said. "I do too - they're not coming to tell us what a great job we're doing." (*Arnhem Recorder*, 11 November 1991)

This sentiment was also widely expressed in the community, in particular among the senior citizens.

Community resentment notwithstanding, the new school superintendent, a former Spanish-language teacher and lifelong resident who had risen through the administrative ranks of the school district, led a massive effort to respond constructively to the NYSED report. Teachers, community residents, NYSED representatives, and university personnel met intensively for six weeks and produced a large document with an outline of programs to be implemented in order to make the schools more responsive to minority student needs.

Implementation, however, was another matter. As our research findings indicate, teachers were ambivalent about charges of racial/ethnic bias and skewed curriculum.

Prior to the 1991-1992 school year there was little talk among teachers of how the school itself might adapt to the changing student population. The school district had offered an introductory course in Spanish for teachers, and held a presentation by speakers from an organization called "Culture Link" in order to sensitize teachers to the needs of culturally different students. The session by Culture Link backfired, however. During the presentation itself teachers responded negatively: some began to ignore the speakers and to converse among themselves, and some walked out on the speakers. Later, teachers angrily reported to non-attending peers that the speakers had failed to address students' and parents' responsibilities in ensuring educational success, instead laying the blame for unsatisfactory minority school performance—"once again"—at the feet of the teachers.

Many school personnel also became defensive of school practices when charges of unfair treatment of minority students surfaced at the beginning of the 1991-1992 school year. Most who spoke publicly on the matter denied the existence of bias in the schools toward minority students. While research on explanations for minority school performance indicates that what takes place in schools plays a significant role in producing unequal outcomes for minority youth (e.g., Cummins, 1989; Gillborn, 1990; Heath, 1983; Jacob & Jordan, 1993; Nieto, 1992), many of the local teachers felt otherwise. They subscribed to an alternative model to explain minority school performance and attributed causality to students' impoverished home lives and lack of motivation. "Any student who really wants to can make it into the regents level if they work hard enough," was a popular sentiment. "In all my years teaching, I only heard the word 'spic' once," a twenty-five-year veteran teacher in the middle school told the field researcher. "I treat all my kids the same. I don't want to know where they come from, it doesn't matter," said another in response to a question about the significance of ethnicity in students' schooling experiences.

Those who held dissenting views generally remained silent. Several teachers who disagreed or took issue with such statements acknowledged in private discussions with the field researcher that they avoided public discussion of their sentiments, either because of their concerns about job security or because they did not want to create "hard feelings" with the rest of the staff.

In a situation of conflicting accounts and highly politicized debate about treatment of Hispanic students and adequacy of school curricula, teachers appeared apprehensive about speaking openly with outsiders about their sentiments or concerns. For instance, one teacher who was writing a paper for a college course refused to acknowledge in her paper that talk generated from the local conflict motivated her desire to construct a curriculum

unit incorporating Puerto Rican culture and history. She feared that by putting the local motivation in writing it might get back to school-board members and endanger her well-being as a teacher. Another teacher, who felt that Hispanic students did in fact get treated unfairly by some teachers, was unwilling to give a NYSED investigator such information, fearing it might somehow affect his tenure with the district.

As one might imagine, in such a context the act of research itself became charged with ambivalences. The researcher frequently encountered teachers who were reticent to permit someone to observe them in the classroom, though all teachers approached did ultimately permit her to observe classes.[11] Teachers were most apprehensive about requests to tape classes and interviews, and despite reassurances of confidentiality, some did refuse to be taped. Those reluctant to put their thoughts and classroom interactions on tape included both teachers from pro-multicultural positions and those who vehemently disagreed with proposed changes. In spite of the fact that the majority of teachers were tenured, and the numbers of tenured teachers dismissed in New York State is almost nonexistent, many did not feel free to state their views openly. Some expressed concern that what they said could be used against them by administrators, board members, or vocal community members. Teachers were generally reluctant to put themselves "at risk" by opening their doors to others.

Making Choices about Traditional Curriculum

In the context of concerns raised in the NYSED report and by local minority spokespersons, English teachers at the secondary level were encouraged to reevaluate the literature canon. Before discussing their responses and concerns, let us first look at the existing literature curriculum and the teachers' reasons for using such selections in their classrooms.

Literature selections in use in the middle school English classrooms included a mutually agreed-upon core of stories and texts that all grade- and track-level[12] teachers used, with remaining texts selected at the individual teacher's discretion. Teachers had agreed, for instance, that all students except those in the "modified" (lowest level) track would read the play *The Diary of Anne Frank* (Goodrich & Hackett, 1989). "Regents" and "honors" students read the novels *The Call of the Wild* by Jack London (1931), and *The Red Pony*

---

[11]The field researcher was a former public school teacher, and this in her opinion helped facilitate her access to classrooms and interviews with teachers, though some teachers requested that she observe their "better-behaved" classes.

[12]Students in Amherst Middle School are divided into honors (H), regents (R), non-regents (NR), and modified (M) tracks. Depending upon the teacher, a student's track may profoundly affect his or her interactions with literature, as some teachers who stressed grammar and spelling spent proportionately more time on such subjects in their lower-level tracks, at the expense of literature teaching.

(1973) by John Steinbeck, while no novels were mandatory for the lowest two tracks, the "nonregents" and modified groups. The remainder of the literature selections, primarily short stories and poems, were drawn from literature anthologies. The "silver" edition of *Prentice-Hall Literature* (1989) was used by honors and regents students; the "red" edition of *Globe Literature* (1990) was used with nonregents students; and the *Scope English Program Reading Anthology* (1979) was used with modified students. Reading teachers had fewer constraints on their choices and sought out "high interest/low reading-level" selections from several sources. We should note that this curriculum falls clearly within the bounds of traditional literature nationwide (as analyzed, for example, by Applebee [1990, 1991]).

When asked to explain reasons for inclusion of particular selections, teacher responses focused on *authorization*, *appropriateness*, and *familiarity*. Their reasons included the following:

- the department mandated some works
- they had to use the books that were available
- they personally liked a particular piece; it moved them
- they felt comfortable with the piece and understood it
- the story held students' interest
- the story taught something important to the students—e.g., the harmful consequences of prejudice and discrimination (*The Diary of Anne Frank*)
- the story included characters facing some of the same problems as the students[13]
- it was a piece with which all students should be familiar
- the reading level was suitable for the students
- the topic was appropriate for young teenagers
- the literature tied in well with the social studies curriculum
- the story contained "universals" that all children could relate to—e.g., "coming of age" struggles, etc.
- a story showed the "human" side of history

Concerns about Multicultural Literature

Prior to 1991, with the exception of Mrs. T., a new teacher in the district who stressed multicultural perspectives in the classroom, teachers in the English/reading department were generally unacquainted with the body of research and theory arguing for a more inclusive curriculum. However, there was considerable discussion of the topic during the 1991-1992 school year, as an outgrowth of the conflict in the community over Hispanic students' educational needs and the subsequent NYSED investigation. Two of the monthly

[13]This was a response more strongly echoed by reading teachers, who worked only with "low readers" who came primarily from lower class backgrounds.

English/reading department meetings were devoted to the topic of multiculturalism, and several teachers attended the New York State English Council conference on multicultural literature as well as a regional conference featuring teachers from nearby districts talking about their uses of multicultural literature in their classrooms. The introduction of texts by Puerto Rican author Nicholasa Mohr into the school in anticipation of her visit also generated considerable discussion about multicultural works.

Concerns about multicultural literature were expressed in department meetings and in interviews and informal discussions with the field researcher over the course of the school year, and were also derived from analysis of classroom transcripts. We have grouped the concerns that emerged into four categories:[14] (1) *knowledge issues*, (2) *logistical issues*, (3) *canonical issues*, and (4) *"danger" issues*. The first two we discuss briefly, the latter two are dealt with at length.

1. Knowledge Issues: "What is *multicultural literature?"*

Despite the mushrooming numbers of journal articles, books, and recent coverage in the popular press of the debates around multiculturalism and the literature canon in universities and schools, most of the teachers at the outset of the fieldwork were unclear about such matters. Recurrent questions included: "What *is* multicultural literature?" "Which books should I be using?" "How do I define African/European/Asian literature?" "Don't we do it already because I teach a book with all black characters/because I teach the works of authors from Russia and other countries/because I include poems from Maya Angelou and Langston Hughes/etc.?"

Teachers were also concerned about the "fuzziness" of the culture concept: "What is culture?" "Whose culture are we supposed to teach?" "How do you teach 'culture' when it's always changing?" One teacher repeatedly stressed that she was not a history teacher, hadn't studied history and culture in school, and didn't feel confident talking about other cultures with her students because of this.

2. Logistical Issues: "How am I supposed to fit it into the curriculum?"

Closely linked to questions of "what" were questions of "how": "How do I find the time to do all the reading?" "How am I supposed to fit it into the curriculum when we barely have time now to do the requirements, with all the emphasis on testing and skills?" Because there were funds available for purchase of such texts in the near future, the usual problem of accessing new materials while dealing with limited funds was not imminent.

---

[14]It must be pointed out that such a tidy scheme obscures the complex ways in which such concerns are linked (but it allows us to understand general themes).

3. Canonical issues: "Good literature."

Teachers did not generally subscribe to a rigid "canon" of literature that should serve as the sole arbiter of what selections they used in the classroom, but they were concerned about offering students "good literature." Teachers frequently alluded to the importance of exposing students to "good literature," but found its qualities somewhat ephemeral. As in the old saying about art, "I know it when I see it," they relied on their ability to recognize it when they saw it, much as this teacher did when asked whether classroom materials should be representative of the diversity of the U.S. population:

> Yeah—proportionately. I don't think you have to do it disproportionately, out of a sense of guilt, a collective sense of guilt. I mean you can feel a thumping "Yes!" in a room when teachers all read one book and say "It's great." I've seen all my colleagues, all of them say, "This is terrific..." When you look in somebody's eyes and they say it's a good book, yeah, it's a really good book.

As these remarks suggest, good literature was something that teachers intuitively agreed upon, and criteria for "good" literature included widespread acknowledgment of its inherent "quality." Teachers also emphasized that good literature contained "universal themes." Several teachers voiced uncertainty about whether "multicultural" literature, which they tended to see as something apart from "traditional" literature, would be considered good literature and have "staying power" in the future. Teachers with higher-track students worried that their students might "lose out" by not being exposed to the classics, particularly if they were expected to know them in order to do well in high school and college. That is, there was an implicit or explicit contrast operating between a vaguely formulated but strongly felt literature canon, with its high quality and universal themes, and multicultural literature, of lesser quality and particularistic themes.

Answering the question "Why should we teach multicultural literature?" also required addressing the question of who the audience for multicultural literature should be. Because of the local conflict, the demand for it in Arnhem was perceived as having grown out of the need to be more "inclusive" in the curriculum, to include something that minority students could better relate to. In middle school/high school departmental meetings and at regional conferences, the importance of incorporating literature written by authors of color into the teaching of "American" literature came up several times. Usually at least one teacher was likely to raise the issue of whether, in the name of "equity," the history and literature of other ethnic groups, such as Italian and Polish Americans, would also need to be deliberately included.

(4) Danger Issues: "Don't get students 'all stirred up.'"

The final set of concerns, and those which are in some ways most important and most problematic in attempts to expand the literature curriculum, are what we call the "danger issues." These are the concerns that, by virtue of their very nature, are often least adequately addressed or confronted in the literature on multiculturalism. These issues are often intimately connected to concerns already addressed above, but are less likely to be acknowledged. Thus, for instance, the question of "Why should we be teaching multicultural literature?" may be answered by talking about the need for "inclusion" and valuing "cultural pluralism," but to leave it at that is to fail to acknowledge the political edge of the debate and the questions of power that surface in the process of "reframing" our histories and literatures. The concerns that we bring together here were often hesitantly brought up by teachers as a side comment or hinted at; rarely were they openly and directly addressed. Sometimes it was the very *lack* of direct talk that led us to infer teachers' unwillingness to engage their students about particular topics.

a. "Language" Issues. Teachers were very concerned about the use of obscenities in the multicultural literature selections they considered. Many considered such terms, in particular slang references to sexual organs, totally unacceptable in school texts and rejected texts solely on that basis. They felt that including such terms was inappropriate because it might appear that the school sanctioned the use of the terms; that they were unprepared to deal with students' reactions to the terms; that they would be embarrassed saying such terms aloud in the classroom; that they were morally offended by the language; or that they would "get into trouble" with administrators and parents because of the language. As we argued earlier, teachers, like their students, enter classrooms as raced, classed, and gendered actors. In the "language" issues we see a double effect of gender: (1) avoidance by female teachers of "profane" language; and (2) the gendering of school as a place where the vulgar realities and words of life are not to be allowed.

b. "Social problems." The literature written by minority authors about the minority experience in the United States may well include topics that middle-class mainstream teachers are ill-prepared to discuss, or indeed to acknowledge: drug usage, gangs, teenage pregnancy and sexuality, AIDS, and violence. While such issues are not exclusive to any ethnic group or particular class, they were often linked in teachers' minds (as in general public perception) with impoverished inner-city residents, the majority of whom were seen as people of color. Teachers tended to avoid discussing such topics. One teacher, for instance, chose not to use a student magazine issue that included a play about AIDS. Students too were aware that some topics were not "school" topics: a Puerto Rican ESL student for instance, trying to explain what the Spanish word *trafico* meant in English to

a group of ESL students, hesitantly said "like drug trafico" while darting glances at the teacher to assess her response to his answer. In avoiding "social problems," we see what is likely a class-based avoidance of social realities. Delinquent peer groups, sexuality, and drug abuse are not exclusive to any particular social class, but the ability to avoid public discussion of them may be a middle-class achievement.

c. "Threats to Authority." Multicultural literature often draws upon the experiences of oppressed national minorities. It introduces into the classroom perspectives and experiences of individuals from social backgrounds that differ from those of most school teachers or from those depicted in traditional school literature. Teachers were often uncomfortable with multicultural literature selections that depicted key societal institutions or their representatives—the courts, police, schools, teachers, the church—in a negative light. For example, one teacher rejected *Nilda* (Mohr, 1986c) for possible use with her students because in the novel the neighborhood children defied the police and turned on the fire hydrant on a scaldingly hot afternoon, and because a Catholic church camp that the main character had attended was depicted negatively. In another case a teacher chose not to use "The Wrong Lunch Line" (Mohr, 1986a) because in the story the children talking among themselves mocked authority figures in the school.

Some teachers felt that discussing the kinds of issues frequently raised in multicultural literature might also "rock the boat" and get students "all stirred up." One teacher described how she had read the introduction to the play *The Diary of Anne Frank* to her students, but studiously avoided discussing Nazi theories with her students because she worried how "all that talk about the superiority of blonde hair and blue eyes" might provoke controversy in her classroom, given the political situation of Euro-American/Latino polarization going on beyond the school doors.

Teachers also felt their authority was eroding. Recent incidents of teachers being called into question for their verbal treatment of minority and nonminority students in Arnhem and elsewhere were popular topics of faculty room conversation. Stories about the "attitude problems" of particular students and teacher run-ins with them abounded. Following one incident, in which a district teacher was suspended without pay for a month after making comments to a student that the school board deemed inappropriate, a long-time teacher angrily stated that teachers might as well paint bulls' eyes on their backs so that they could be "picked off" more easily.

In summarizing teacher response to multicultural literature, we should say that it was not "cultural difference" per se that was at issue with the avoided texts and topics. Most teachers would subscribe to the notion that celebrating "diversity" was a worthwhile endeavor "if it didn't go too far." "Too far" meant many things: challenging the existing

literature canon; questioning underlying social assumptions that teachers endorsed (e.g., that police, schools, and churches are fundamentally benign for *all* social groups); or questioning their own positions as arbiters of classroom language and discipline.

A CLASSROOM CASE STUDY: MRS. L.

The issues brought out in the preceding section illustrate general concerns that teachers had regarding the incorporation of multicultural literatures into the classroom. Mrs. L., whose approach to the English classroom is described below, was one of the teachers most reticent to adopt a multicultural curriculum and approach in her classroom. As will become evident, her classroom was a model of what Miller (1992) and others describe as the "authoritarian classroom." Because her style was long the norm in classrooms, her traditional approach merits examiniation. It raises some questions about how "difference" can be introduced into classroom discourse.

Mrs. L., a veteran with over twenty years' teaching experience, taught eleven short stories to her eighth-grade nonregents class over the course of the school year, ten of which had white males as the major characters while the eleventh involved a white male narrator telling the story from his perspective of how a "girl pitcher" saves the day for his team (circa 1950's). Only through the required play *The Diary of Anne Frank* did her students encounter a major female character or narrator.

Mrs. L. had been under pressure to move from her primarily grammar-based teaching approach toward a more literature-based curriculum, but had consistently resisted doing so. She was reluctant to accept criticism and guarded the prerogatives of seniority. When a college student, a male in his thirties who had returned for a teaching degree, observed her class and then made a suggestion to her about something she might want to try in class, her angry retort (describing the incident to the researcher) was that he had no right to tell her—a twenty-year-plus veteran—how to teach. She spoke with pride of having been considered by administrators and parents to be such an excellent teacher that she had always been given the honors-level class.

Mrs. L. felt that her opportunities to teach literature had been consisitently eroded over the years because of the need to prepare students for state exams and because of declining student skills. She explained her emphasis on grammar in lower tracks, and the students' consequent lack of writing opportunities and exposure to literature, as a result of the need for them to improve their grammar skills before moving on to reading and writing. (Her eighth-grade nonregents class did not write any essays until mid-January, when they were provided with "the correct form.") While her regents-level students read two novels, and her honors section did book reports and a "heroes" unit, her nonregents students focused

on grammar, short stories, and fill-in and short-answer exams. She drew from stories that she had used in previous years, and did not alter her literature choices in response to the discussions around multicultural literature. She was adamantly opposed to the idea of teaming and de-tracking, which were scheduled to be implemented in the middle school in the upcoming year.

Mrs. L.'s literature selections included "classic" pieces that she felt students should be exposed to, such as Homer's *Iliad,* "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" by Washington Irving (1963), and works by Robert Frost. She also drew upon adventure and "fun" stories that she felt students liked and "morality tales" such as "The Man Without a Country" (Hale, 1963) that held a message for students about traits such as courage or patriotism. Her choices were frequently stories that had long been part of her teaching repertoire, and theme units that she had developed in her early years of teaching and had used successfuly, she felt, with an earlier generation of students.

In her nonregents-level class there was little opportunity for, or evidence of, student involvement with the classroom literature. Questions tended to be lower-level recall questions, and students either followed dutifully along or "drifted off" in the class until called upon. There were few calls for them to "engage" with the texts, to draw connections between their own lives and those in the literature.

Mrs. L. also subtly reinforced lower-track students' awareness of their ranking in school and the larger society, though she intended her statements to make them proud of their accomplishments and to motivate them. In one instance, speaking to an eighth-grade nonregents class and discussing results of a spelling test given to all eighth graders, she said, "I was pleasantly surprised . . . some of you beat out some of my honors kids. Yeah!" On another day with the same class, she ignored the contrast between levels when students mentioned it:

> MRS. L.: You guys are doing better than my first-period class. My first period class was dead.
> STUDENT: Aren't they honors?
> MRS. L.: What does that mean?
> STUDENT: They're smarter than we are.
> MRS. L.: [No response to statement.] I asked them what did you do—sleep till 11:00?

Mrs. L. also accepted the assumption that the nonregents track meant technical training with a clear sexual division of labor, as when she discussed the local high school's vocational program:

MRS. L.: They've got quite a carpentry shop up there. And they've got a program for you gals.
STUDENT: Cosmetology.
MRS. L.: Right. Many times people look down upon those who work with their hands. Don't. Do they make a lot of money?
STUDENTS: Yes.
MRS. L.: We need these people.

The messages she sent to the students were straightforward and traditional: that students in nonregents classes performing well were unusual; that nonregents students were destined for the vocational program at the high school; and that the programs were gendered, with boys pursuing carpentry and girls pursuing cosmetology.

Mrs. L., concerned that she not be out of step with other teachers, and feeling pressure from the supervisor to alter her classroom practices, did introduce the works of Puerto Rican author Nicholasa Mohr to her students prior to the author's visit, reading two of Nicholasa Mohr's short stories to her students. She did not, however, discuss the stories extensively, incorporate them into exam questions, or add them to the list of readings covered during the year for students to draw upon in answering their final examination questions.

In her classroom response to the stories, she disparaged the vernacular used by the main characters and telegraphed to the students her own discomfort with ethnic difference. In the following example, taken from a grade eight regents-level classroom discussion, she reads from background material about the author and from a Nicholasa Mohr story (1986b) entitled "Once Upon a Time . . ." (note the treatment of vernacular idiom as well as of Spanish/English differences):

I want to give you a little background about Nicholasa Mohr, so that when she comes next week to talk to you people, you know something about her. [Reading aloud:] "Nicholasa Mohr was born in Manhattan, where she grew up in *El* ____?____?" [Pauses.] The word begins with *B*. [Points to the two Hispanic students in the classroom.] You Hispanic students have some insights here? [No response from two students. Long pause.] *Barrio*. She grew up in *El Barrio*.

[Later in same class, reading aloud from Nicholasa Mohr's short story "Once Upon a Time. . .":] "'What do you think?' asked the second girl. 'Should we tell somebody what we seen [a dead body]?'" [Addresses class, in an astonished tone of voice:] *Seen?* [Continues reading:] "'. . . We better not; then they'll ask us what we was doing up on the roof and all,' said the first girl." [Addresses class:] These kids haven't had Mrs. L.'s grammar class yet.

We need not belabor the obvious: like many Americans, Mrs. L. was uncomfortable with the use of vernacular in literature, as shown by her response to "seen" and her comment about grammar. She was also uncomfortable with Spanish in the classroom, as shown in her treatment of the place name *El Barrio*.

Mrs. L. indicated that, while she thought there were "universal" themes in Nicholasa Mohr's stories, the "specific ethnicity" of the characters (primarily Puerto Rican) was a problem, as students would not relate to the texts. She framed the texts as "Puerto Rican" literature, explaining to her class that the author had taken up writing because she realized there were ". . . no books for Hispanic students, who are different." She insisted in an interview prior to a follow-up class discussion of a short story that none of her students had displayed any interest in Mohr's books. After the subsequent class discussion of a short story by Mohr, however, all of the female students requested a copy of the order forms for purchase of her works.[15] In another (8NR) class, 10 of the 14 students present (including both males and females, and all 5 of the Hispanic students) requested order forms.

Mrs. L. attempted to avoid conflict or heated discussions in her classroom. Her questioning style was to solicit one-word or one-sentence factual answers, which thus limited students' opportunities to voice their own opinions or responses in class. She was aware that some students harbored racist sentiments, but attempted to ignore prejudicial remarks by students said loud enough to be heard by teacher and students but quietly enough to be ignored if the teacher chose to do so. In the following excerpt, Mrs. L. is attempting to elicit the meaning of the spelling word "emancipation" from her students:

> MRS. L.: What's the "Emancipation Proclamation"?
> RUSSELL [black male, calling out]: That's social studies.
> PAUL [white male, under his breath but audibly]: Freed the niggers.

Mrs. L. appeared not to hear Paul. A Puerto Rican student sitting two rows away from him was visibly angry, and shot a hostile look at Paul but said nothing. After the bell

---

[15]Mrs. L considered stories with girls as major characters to be "girls' stories," while stories with males as major characters were deemed appropriate for all students. Nicholasa Mohr's stories frequently have female protagonists. Prior to asking students if they wanted an order form, Mrs. L. had read "Once Upon a Time..." to the class, in which three girls encounter a dead gang member in a city alley while playing, in order to provide some background on the author so that students might generate questions to ask her in her upcoming visit. The following classroom discussion may have influenced students' perceptions of the "gendering" of Mohr's works:

> MRS. L.: Can we ask this question [whether the story reflect's the author's own experiences growing up] of her?
> FEMALE STUDENT: No! She might start crying.
> MALE STUDENT: Aren't these girls' books?
> MRS. L.: That was my complaint, too.

rang, the Puerto Rican student walked over to his African American friend Russ and repeated what Paul had said. Mrs. L. acknowledged to the researcher after class that she had heard the remark but didn't want to "make a scene."

We have organized our description of Mrs. L's classroom in order to illustrate the traditional nature of her literature selection, her avoidance of issues of inequality and prejudice, and her linguistic prescriptivism. But we should also emphasize that in these respects she is a perfectly normal, good teacher of her generation. As we noted above, she had for years been assigned honors classes, and only in recent years had she begun to seem somewhat out of step with recent trends in English education. She was the most resistant in the middle school, but not atypical of several other longtime teachers; to varying degrees, many exhibited these same qualities.

DISCUSSION

> Knowledge is neither neutral nor apolitical, yet it is generally treated by teachers and schools as if it were. . . . Every educational decision made at any level, whether by a teacher or an entire school system, reflects the political ideology and worldview of the decision maker. . . . It is important to understand that as teachers, all the decisions we make, no matter how neutral they seem, may impact in unconscious but fundamental ways on the lives and experiences of our students. (Nieto, 1992, p. 219)

As Nieto suggests, a multicultural curriculum has been encouraged as a primary means of making schools more inclusive, as a way of breaking the silences and acknowledging the political nature of educational choices. Yet failure to acknowledge the importance of the teacher in the delivery of that curriculum may mean that adopting a more "inclusive" curriculum or text produces little significant change. Urged to broaden their classroom literature selections, teachers in Arnhem drew upon their own experiences and popular understandings in ways that silenced particular discourses—for example, through omission of particular types of selections, avoidance of classroom discussion, or subtle reinforcement of societal biases. These practices were not intended or understood to be harmful to particular groups; the overwhelming majority of teachers were concerned individuals who believed that they were acting in the best interests of their students. But without being encouraged to examine the ways in which they contributed to school practices that marginalized particular groups of students, little of consequence was apparently accomplished in actual curricular or classroom reform.

There is little in the educational biographies of Arnhem teachers, or American teachers more generally, to predispose them toward embracing the merits of a more inclusive literature curriculum. Most current teachers acquired their degrees prior to both the

proliferation of research attesting to the role of cultural difference in the creation of unequal educational outcomes and the recent challenges at the university level to the literature canon. Recent graduates are unlikely to have fared a great deal better, since teacher-education programs have been slow to incorporate a significant multicultural focus (see Grant, 1992; Nieto, 1992; Ramsey et al., 1989).[16]

Miller (1992) has argued in a recent essay that cultural difference in the classroom can form the basis for the dialogic, reflective thinking that all students need to learn, but only if new stances toward texts, collaborative reflection, and sustained dialogue are actively sought in classroom literature discussion. The dominant metaphors of teaching work against this dialogic orientation, however. On their way through our educational systems, teachers have passed through classrooms dominated by what has been termed a "banking" (Freire, 1970), or "transmission" model of education (Cummins, 1989), in which the teacher is understood as the dispenser of a preset body of (elite) knowledge and the student the passive recipient of an education. Teachers "possess" knowledge; students lack it. Teachers are understood as, and expected to be, the "authorities" on a fixed body of knowledge (Applebee, 1993; Giroux & McLaren, 1988; Hirsch, 1987). They are not encouraged to see knowledge as socially constructed and themselves as lifelong learners. They have had little if any exposure to a model of "critical literacy," which "invites teachers and students to 'problematize' all subjects of study—that is, to understand existing knowledge as an historical product deeply invested with the values of those who developed such knowledge" (Shor, 1986, p.420).

In addition to the professional socialization of many teachers, there are also the conditions of work to consider, both daily conditions and those held over the longer term. The nature of teaching traditionally has been that teachers are isolated behind closed doors, with only students as an audience; when administrators enter to observe classes, it is almost always for evaluative purposes. Opportunities for teachers to observe their peers and reflect upon their own teaching are virtually nonexistent (Cuban, 1984).

As teachers in Arnhem are not required to take classes following acquisition of a master's degree (as is the case in New York in general), and are funded to attend at most one educational conference per year, exposure to new information and group discussion is likely to be limited to departmental meetings, an annual or biannual "Superintendent's Day," after-school workshops, in-service courses, and teachers' own initiatives beyond the school doors. In Arnhem, as elsewhere, department meetings are frequently taken up with

---

[16] Our findings support the empirical studies. The three most recent college graduates on the Arnhem Middle School staff indicated that they had taken no such courses.

more mundane concerns, including paperwork, scheduling, and the like. While several English/reading department meetings in Arnhem had been used one year to begin to explore what a multicultural education might involve, and how tracking might work to disadvantage certain groups (Oakes, 1985), department meetings were virtually eliminated the following year when the position of department head was abolished for budgetary reasons.

Serious curricular reform requires careful attention to the conditions (and consequences) of change, but there is little in the existing service network for teachers that provides such sustained attention. Conference days and after-school workshops may be useful means of introducing a topic, but constitute little more than lip service without adequate follow-through. In-service courses, when run by teachers' centers, are more likely to be oriented toward teachers' concerns and needs, but many teachers never avail themselves of such courses for a variety of reasons. They may perceive no benefit to them because the financial remuneration is minimal, or they may complain—with some justification—that the professors are "eggheads" with no idea what classroom realities are like. Outside presenters, while tackling difficult issues, must be aware that most teachers feel embattled and are therefore quick to reject what looks like uninformed criticism. As we discussed above, many teachers disliked what they perceived as the hectoring tone of the Culture Link workshop. As we also discussed above, teachers resented the outside imposition of NYSED-driven reforms.

Paradoxically, while certain outside authorities were questioned, others were taken for granted. Arnhem teachers' responses to the question of how they make literature selections point to some of the many ways in which schools function as conservative institutions. Teachers indicated a reliance on "experts" (e.g., editors of anthologies) in making their choices; selected from pieces that they themselves had enjoyed; and attempted to include selections that had a "good message" embedded in them. We will not here enter into the heated debate of whether basals and anthologies "de-skill" teachers (see Apple, 1986; Baumann, 1992; Shannon, 1993), but we restate our point: while authorities and "outsiders" demanding changes were rejected, other authorities had been assimilated into the taken-for-granteds of teaching and curriculum. Criteria of "enjoyable" stories with "good messages" can also be problematic. While the moral optimism of "a good message" is appropriate for educational endeavors, as an unexamined category of common sense it can block engagement with texts that explore the more difficult and painful aspects of American life.

Given the homogeneity of the English/reading teachers' ethnic and class backgrounds, and the remarkable homogeneity of the literature curriculum nationwide (Applebee, 1990),

these teachers' selections were likely to reflect and support a very particular view of the world. When left unexamined and not raised to a conscious level, such views unavoidably excluded other voices, especially those of students of color and working-class students. Following Fine (1987), we suggest that this exclusion or silencing is pervasive, affecting students, teachers, and the general sense of what can be discussed in school settings.

Fine (1987, p. 157) argues that "silencing" is basic to educational institutions:

> [S]ilencing constitutes a process of institutionalized policies and practices which obscure the very social, economic, and therefore experiential conditions of students' daily lives, and which expel from written, oral, and nonverbal expression substantive and critical "talk" about these conditions. . . . Yet simple, seamless pronouncements of equal opportunity and educational credentials as the primary mode of mobility are woven through the curriculum and pedagogy of urban high school classes. Silencing constitutes the process by which contradictory evidence, ideologies, and experiences find themselves buried, camouflaged, and discredited.

We understand Fine to be saying that institutions are constituted by negations as well as assertions, by hidden curricula as well as overt curricula, by what is unsaid and excluded as well as what is said and included. In Arnhem, despite an opening up of the question of what literature gets taught in the classroom, silencing occurred in a variety of ways. It occurred through omission of particular topics and selections (e.g., by defining "quality" narrowly); through failure to use the literature to create an environment in which students could safely bring their own lives and perspectives into the classroom (e.g., by avoiding social-problems literature); and through subtle reinforcement of racial, class, and gender hierarchies (e.g., by simply accepting gender categories in vocational education and by ignoring openly racist comments made during lessons).

"Naming" is what Fine calls the opposite of silencing. It is critical talk about "the very social, economic, and therefore experiential conditions of students' daily lives" (p. 157). In her study of an inner city school, Fine discovered that naming was something that educators studiously avoided. Instead they smoothed over or ignored the social contradictions that students' daily lives presented (see also Shujaa, 1991). A similar case for silencing/avoiding naming can be made for Arnhem, whether the issue is recognition of different groups through organizations, social studies curriculum, or simply the treatment of students. Hispanic students at the high school, for instance, had asked to set up a school club for minority youth, where they might meet to discuss their encounters with prejudice and discrimination and find ways to confront such issues and generally provide support for each other. The request was turned down, and instead a "multicultural"

club was officially established, with the mission of encouraging students to value diversity. Diversity was divorced from underlying issues of inequality and power.[17]

There is a powerful and understandable desire among teachers to want to believe that the United States has been a land of opportunity for all, and that all groups have encountered essentially the same barriers. It was problematic to acknowledge prejudice, discrimination, and racism in the classroom, and this would be necessary in discussing the literatures and histories of the oppressed. An Arnhem social studies teacher teaching about immigration asked his Puerto Rican students to understand their experiences as equivalent to those of turn-of-the-century European immigrants, who had struggled so that their children or grandchildren would "have it all." The possibility that racial hierarchies and changing economic conditions might have a bearing on the Puerto Rican community's economic and social location (Rodríguez, 1989) was never raised. Nor were the students asked to examine their parents' or their own experiences and test them against his contention that "we all face the same problems" as newcomers.

Other teachers systematically elided discussion in classrooms of the local controversy about racism on the school board and in the school system because it was "too hot" a topic. As noted above, one teacher acknowledged that she had quickly skipped over the discussion on Nazi beliefs in the prelude to the play *The Diary of Anne Frank*. She didn't want to introduce the idea of "racial superiority" into the classroom discussion because of what was being said in students' homes and the local media during the controversy. In general teachers were more comfortable discussing instances of prejudice and discrimination when separated by time and space from the present: Nazi Germany, South Africa, or earlier historical eras in the United States. They were concerned that including unflattering portraits of the United States today would somehow "demoralize" students, or leave them angry and hostile. As members of the "majority group," teachers frequently felt defensive and attacked.

Many teachers also avoided acknowledging "race" and "ethnic difference" among students. They spoke of how they didn't see differences between their students, how they forgot their students' last names after a few weeks, how they treated all students the same, how they didn't want to know who was "Puerto Rican" and who was "Costa Rican" because it might prejudice them. (Costa Rican students were generally viewed as much better students, from more caring homes.) While such teachers believed that to be "color-blind" was desirable, because it meant that that they treated all their students fairly and impartially,

---

[17] In her study, Fine (1987, p. 168) calls this tactic "maintaining silencing through (contrived) democracy."

> the opposite may actually be true. That is, to see differences, in this line of reasoning, is to see defects and inferiority. Thus, to be color-blind may result in *refusing to accept differences* and therefore accepting the dominant culture as the norm. It may result in denying the very identity of our students, thereby making them invisible . . . Being color-blind can be positive if it means being *nondiscriminatory* in attitude and behavior. However, it is sometimes used as a way to deny differences that help make us who we are. (Nieto, 1992, p. 109)

When teachers deny differences such as race or language, that may be integral components of their students' identities, they block out qualities which the students' parents or communities may view positively (e.g., Paley, 1979; Zentella, 1981). The unwillingness of teachers to acknowledge difference in the classroom constitutes a silence—a common American uneasiness with the ugly fact that "difference" is frequently evaluated negatively.

CONCLUSION

While generalizing from any one case study can be inappropriate, qualitative studies such as this one are important for understanding the actual complexity of social and educational change. We have attended to the politics of multiculturalism in a particular community, both the public controversies and the more private dynamics influencing teachers' responses to changing students and changing curriculum. While the particular constellation of events and actors in which this school and its teachers operate may be unique, the general trends that schools and educators confront are not. These include rapid demographic changes, growing economic inequality, a besieged feeling among teachers, and a mounting frustration among people of color over their failure to achieve educational, social, and economic parity with other Americans.

Teachers in Arnhem are not unlike teachers in general (see Fuller, 1992): while they constitute a relatively homogeneous group in terms of race, ethnicity, social class, and "home ties," they teach an increasingly diverse student population. As is true in many school districts across the nation and as the NYSED report substantiated, teachers in Arnhem were generally unacquainted with research and theory addressing how schools disadvantage students from nonmainstream backgrounds, and the consequences of traditional practices and policies went largely unexamined until ethnic conflict and the NYSED investigation called them into question. As did Fine (1987) and Shujaa (1991), we found that certain topics and discourses were typically avoided or omitted in classrooms, faculty discussions, and school texts, constituting a pervasive silencing that negated or denied the lived realities of many of the district's students.

Arnhem teachers' encounters with and responses to the multicultural selections are instructive. Those who challenge the traditional canons and the consequences of such canons at the university level—academic scholars, for instance, who are feminists, ethnic studies scholars, historians of social movements—typically are ideologically aligned and politically committed to challenging a status quo that works in multiple ways to marginalize and silence particular groups. But when we transfer the challenge to the literature canon of the public schools, we ask teachers who may have no such orientations, understandings, or commitment to become involved in the task. The findings of this study suggest the need for teacher educators to recognize that incorporating multicultural literature into school curricula, and encouraging the introduction of a "dialogic pedagogy" (Miller, 1992), is often a "dangerous" process, one which challenges some of our basic and cherished assumptions about knowledge, schooling, and opportunity in the United States.

Celebrating diversity by itself does little to assist students—or teachers—in confronting the contradictions of living in a nation that espouses democracy and equality but was built upon and continues to tolerate vast inequalities among groups (Nasaw, 1979), the consequences of which teachers confront daily in their classrooms. The success or failure of moves to "open up" literature classrooms and challenge the school canon cannot be measured solely by counting the numbers of authors of color in new anthologies. As university researchers and educators, we need to continue to stay directly connected to schools and classrooms, working as partners with teachers and exploring their concerns, perspectives, and responses to reform initiatives. Similarly, top-down initiatives for change must be accompanied by close attention to local conditions, including teacher perspectives and the constraints that teachers face. It is essential that teachers have access to a more inclusive curriculum, and that they acknowledge literary texts as the products of raced, classed, and gendered perspectives of the authors (see Purves, 1991). However, they also need sustained opportunities to engage in reflective and critical discussion about the conditions of teaching, about the cultural and social perspectives teachers bring to classrooms and texts, about what those perspectives include and exclude, and about the possible consequences for the increasingly diverse students that they teach. The conditions that mitigate against teacher collaboration need to be examined and the barriers to such collaboration removed. Breaking down the isolation of traditional classrooms requires information and discussion. Teachers need environments in which they can observe each others' classrooms and reflect honestly upon the consequences of their classroom practices.

In such a setting, colleagues who have successfully implemented classroom practices more responsive to the needs of a diverse student body could become resources for a

school community, providing "on-the-ground" models of change that are frequently absent from policy debates about multicultural education. Such initiatives were undertaken by some teachers in Arnhem, as our next research report discusses (Bigler, forthcoming). They involved new approaches to language and to student-teacher relations, and they involved confronting "danger" because they occurred not in the ideal conditions we have called for but rather in the uncertain, divided conditions we have just described.

REFERENCES

Apple, M. (1986). *Teachers and texts*. New York: Routledge.

Applebee, A. N. (1990). *Literature instruction in American schools* (Report no. 1.4). Albany: National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning, State University of New York.

Applebee, A. N. (1991). *A study of high school literature anthologies* (Report no. 1.5). Albany: National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning, State University of New York.

Applebee, A. N. (1993). *Beyond the lesson: Reconstructing curriculum as a domain for culturally significant conversations* (Report No. 1.7). Albany: National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning, State University of New York.

Au, K. (1993). *Literature instruction in multicultural settings*. New York: Harcourt Brace College Publishers.

Banks, J. (1988). *Multiethnic education: Theory and practice*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Banks, J. (1991). A curriculum for empowerment, action, and change. In C. Sleeter (Ed.), *Empowerment through multicultural education* (pp. 125-142). Albany: State University of New York Press.

Barrera, R., Liguori, O., & Salas, L. (1992). Ideas a literature can grow on: Key insights for enriching and expanding children's literature about the Mexican-American experience. In V. Harris (Ed.), *Teaching multicultural literature in grades K-8*. Norwood, MA: Christopher Gordon.

Baumann, J. (1992). Basal reading programs and the deskilling of teachers: A critical examination of the arguments. *Reading Research Quarterly, 27*(4), 390-398.

Bigler, E. (1994). *Talking "American": Dialoguing on difference in upstate New York* (Report Series 7.2). Albany: National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning, State University of New York.

Bigler, E. (forthcoming). *Reading the world: Inclusion and exclusion in classroom texts and talk*. Albany: National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning, State University of New York.

Cook-Gumperz, J. (Ed.). (1986) *The social construction of literacy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Costo, R., & Henry, J. (Eds.). (1970). *Textbooks and the American Indian*. San Francisco: Indian Historian Press.

Council on Interracial Books for Children. (1975). Chicano culture in children's literature: Stereotypes, distortions, and omissions. *Interracial books for children bulletin, 5,* 7-14.

Council on Interracial Books for Children. (1976). Asian Americans in children's books. *Interracial books for childrens bulletin, 7.*

Cuban, L. (1984). *How teachers taught: Constancy and change in American classrooms, 1890-1980.* New York: Longman.

Cummins, J. (1989). *Empowering minority students.* Sacramento: California Association for Bilingual Education.

Edelsky, C. (1991). *With literacy and justice for all.* London: Falmer.

Fine, M. (1987). Silencing in public schools. *Language Arts, 64*(2), 157-174.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.* New York: Seabury.

Freire, P. (1985). *The politics of education.* South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey.

Fuller, M. L. (1992). Teacher education programs and increasing minority school populations: An educational mismatch? In C. Grant (Ed.), *Research and multicultural education: From the margins to the mainstream* (pp. 184-200). London: Falmer.

Gillborn, D. (1990). *Race, ethnicity and education: Teaching and learning in multi-ethnic schools.* London: Unwin Hyman.

Giroux, H., & McClaren, P. (1988). Critical theory, cultural literacy, and the closing of the American mind: A review of Hirsch and Bloom. *Harvard Educational Review, 58*(2), 172-194.

Globe literature (red level). (1990). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Globe.

Goodrich, F., & Hackett, A. (1989). *The diary of Anne Frank.* In *Prentice Hall literature* (silver) (pp. 303-368). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Grant, C. (Ed.) (1992). *Research and multicultural education: From the margins to the mainstream.* London: Falmer.

Gray, P. (1991, July 8). Whose America? *Time,* pp. 12-17.

Hale, E. E. (1963). The man without a country. Reprinted in *Adventures for readers* (pp. 358-374). New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.

Harris, V. (Ed.) (1992). *Teaching multicultural literature in grades K-8.* Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon.

Heath, S. (1983). *Ways with words.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Henry, W. (1990, April 9). Beyond the melting pot. *Time,* pp. 28-31.

Hirsch, E. D. (1987). *Cultural literacy*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Howard, E.F. (1991). Authentic multicultural literature for children: An author's perspective. In M. Lindgren (Ed.), *The multicolored mirror: Cultural substance in literature for children and young adults*. Fort Atkinson, WI: Highsmith.

Hymowitz, K. (1991, August 19 & 26). Babar the racist. *New Republic*, pp. 12-14.

Irving, W. (1963). The legend of Sleepy Hollow. Reprinted in *Adventures for readers* (pp. 375-397). New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.

Jacob, E., & Jordan, C. (Eds.). (1993). *Minority education: Anthropological perspectives*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Jones, M. (1991, September 9). It's a not so small world. *Newsweek*, pp. 64-65.

Larrick, N. (1965, September 11). The all-white world of children's books. *Saturday Review*, pp. 63-65, 84-85.

Lieberman, M. (1972). "Some day my prince will come": Female acculturation through the fairy tale. *College English, 34*(3), 383-393.

Lindgren, M. (Ed.). (1991). *The multicolored mirror: Cultural substance in literature for children and young adults*. Fort Atkinson WI: Highsmith.

London, Jack. (1931). *The call of the wild*. New York: Macmillan.

Melville, M. (1988, Spring). Hispanics: Race, class or ethnicity? *Journal of Ethnic Studies, 16*(1), 67-83.

Miller, S. (1992). *Creating change: Toward a dialogic pedagogy*. Albany: National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning, State University of New York.

Mohr, N. (1979). *Felita*. New York: Dial.

Mohr, N. (1986a). *El Bronx remembered* (rev. ed). Houston: Arte Público.

Mohr, N. (1986b). *Going home*. New York: Dial.

Mohr, N. (1986c). *Nilda* (rev. ed.). Houston: Arte Público.

Murphy, R. (1970). *The dialectics of social life*. New York: Basic.

Nasaw, D. (1979). *Schooled to order: A social history of public schooling in the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press.

New York State Social Studies Review and Development Committee. (1991). *One nation, many peoples: A declaration of cultural interdependence*. Albany: New York State Education Department.

Nieto, S. (1992). *Affirming diversity: The sociopolitical context of multicultural education*. White Plains, NY: Longman.

Novak, M. (1971). *The rise of the unmeltable ethnics: Politics and culture in the seventies.* New York: Macmillan.

Oakes, J. (1985). *Keeping track: How schools structure inequality.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Paley, V. (1979). *White teacher.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Prentice Hall literature (silver edition). (1989). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Purves, A. C. (1991). *The ideology of canons and cultural concerns in the literature curriculum* (Report no. 6.4). Albany: National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning, State University of New York.

Ramsey, P., Vold, E., & Williams, L. (1989). *Multicultural education: A sourcebook.* New York: Garland.

Ravitch, D. (1990). E pluribus plures. *American Scholar, 59*(3), 337-354.

Rodríguez, C. (1989). *Puerto Ricans: Born in the U.S.A.* Boston: Unwin Hyman.

Scope English program reading anthology (level two). (1979). New York: Scholastic.

Shannon, P. (1993). Critique of false generosity: A response to Baumann. *Reading Research Quarterly, 28*(1), 8-14.

Shor, I. (1986). Equality is excellence: Transforming teacher education and the learning process. *Harvard Educational Review, 56*(4), 406-426.

Shujaa, M. (1991). *Teachers' responses to the implementation of an African/African American curriculum content infusion policy.* Final report submitted to the New York African American Institute, State University of New York, State University Plaza, Albany.

Sleeter, C. (Ed.). (1991). *Empowerment through multicultural education.* Albany: State University of New York Press.

Sleeter, C., & Grant, C. (1988). *Making choices for multicultural education: Five approaches to race, class, and gender.* Columbus, OH: Merrill.

Sobol, T. (1989). *A curriculum of inclusion: Report of the commissioners task force on minorities: Equity and excellence.* Albany: New York State Education Department.

Steinbeck, J. (1973). *The red pony.* New York: Bantam.

Weis, L. (1990). *Working class without work.* New York: Routledge.

Zentella, A. (1981). Language variety among Puerto Ricans. In C. Ferguson & S. Heath (Eds.), *Language in the U.S.A.* London: Cambridge University Press.